

The Perception of Self Among University Students in Two Cultures: Portugal and the United States

Rui Paixão*

Rui Aragão Oliveira**

Richard C. Page***

Jeffrey Dulin***

Jodi Carlton***

Resumo: Para a psicologia e para o *counseling* é fundamental estudar e monitorizar continuamente os efeitos da cultura e da identidade de género nas percepções e atitudes dos diferentes indivíduos. O objectivo deste estudo é, assim, o de comparar as atitudes de estudantes portugueses com as atitudes de estudantes americanos (E.U.A.) em relação à percepção que fazem do seu *self* ideal e real. O estudo destas percepções foi realizado recorrendo aos factores “avaliação” e “potência” do diferencial semântico. Os resultados indicam que as mulheres portuguesas e americanas classificam a “potência” do seu *self* ideal de uma forma significativamente mais baixa do que os homens. Os homens portugueses, por outro lado, apresentam a maior classificação em termos de “potência” do *self* ideal e as mulheres americanas a mais baixa.

Palavras-Chave: Percepção do *Self*; *Self* Ideal; *Self* Real; Diferencial Semântico.

Abstract: In the field of counseling and psychology, it is important to continuously study and monitor the effects of culture and gender on an individual's perceptions and attitudes. The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes of students in Portugal and the United States regarding the perceptions of ideal and real self. Data was collected using the evaluative and potency scales of the semantic differential. The results indicated that females from both countries rated the potency of My Ideal Self significantly lower than males. Additionally, Portuguese males ranked the potency of My Ideal Self highest of all groups, while U.S. females ranked the potency of My Ideal Self lowest of all groups.

Key-words: Perceptions of Self; Ideal Self; Real Self; Semantic differential scales.

Few constructors have had as much research and theoretical emphasis placed upon it as the self. The self has been studied within the context of a variety of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, genetics and anthropology. It has been associated with personality development

(Page & Cheng, 1992; Lutz & Ross, 2003), identified as a factor in school success (Bruneau, 1985; Wiest, Wong & Kreil, 1998; Williams & Currie, 2000; Quatman & Swanson, 2002), and as an important influence in guiding overall behavior (Griffin, Chassin & Young, 1981; Triandis, 1989). Furthermore, research in this area has resulted in defining various perspectives from which the self may be perceived: self-esteem, self-concept, self-

* Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal.

** Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada, Lisboa, Portugal.

*** University of Georgia, Athens (U.S.A.).

efficacy, public and private self, and collective self (Triandis, 1989; Page & Berkow, 1991).

Research has recently focused on influential environmental factors, i.e. culture and demographics, on the development of self in individuals (Rassam, 2001; Kaufman, 1995; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990; Triandis, McClusker & Hui, 1990; Triandis, 1989). One of the more recent growing interdisciplinary fields, cultural psychology, examines how human development and culture interact in the individual's formation and understanding of the self (Shweder & Sullivan, 1993; Lutz & Ross, 2003). In the United States, research has demonstrated a cultural emphasis on individuality including individual achievement, autonomy, and independence in the achievement of goals (Triandis *et al.*, 1990; Kupperminc *et al.*, 2004). In contrast, Portuguese culture, where Catholicism is paramount (Barreto & Preto, 1996), stresses a more collective of group oriented approach where the domestic unit is of primary importance (Hollo & Leis, 1985). However, as a result of recent literature, it is the opinion of the authors that in the last decades, as a consequence of the political and economical transformation in Portugal, an ideological change is taking place, bringing about a more individualistic culture (Barreto & Preto, 1996).

An undisputedly important influence in the development of self-identity is gender identity and gender roles, which are influenced by environmental factors as well (Frable, 1997; Jambunathan & Hurlbut, 2000; Van Gundy, 2002). Gender identity includes personal and social attributes, social relationships, interests and abilities, symbolic and stylistic behaviors, and biological/physical/material attributes.

The roles of men and women in Portugal have been the subject of various studies such as a 1985 study by Hollos and Leis which reported that the roles and conduct of men and women tend to be guided by different values and expectations. It has been stated that Portuguese men are accustomed to living mainly for themselves, looking for personal and professional achievement, and receiving affection. Conversely, Portuguese women live mainly for providing affection to their families, which they believe has the effect of producing the balanced development of children (Castro, Pimenta & Martins, 1988). Evidence exists that gender roles in Portugal are learned at an early age. Neto, Williams and Winder (1991) found a tendency for Portuguese children to have a greater knowledge of female stereotypes than male stereotypes. Deviance from these normative role stereotypes is often criticized from members of both sexes (Brogger & Gilmore, 1997).

Many studies have been conducted regarding occupational choice and knowledge, academic success (Fontaine, 1991; Coelho e Silva, 1993), suicide rates (Castro, Pimenta & Martins, 1988), and gender stereotyping (Neto, 1997). There has been controversy, however, in deciding whether the distinct separation of gender roles in Portugal results in a power differential between men and women (Hollo & Leis, 1985; Brogger & Gilmore, 1997). Research has found that woman's power is seen as arriving from her central role in familial operation (Hollo & Leis, 1985), and, by the same historical condition, as a social and political power behind man's power (Malpique, 1990). However, research further demonstrates that matrifocality is not necessarily correlated with female power and independence (Brogger & Gilmore, 1997).

Current research in Portugal demonstrates that many of the traditional ideas of men and women are changing as a function of modernization (Castro, Pimenta & Martins, 1988), emigration (Brogger & Gilmore, 1997) and political transformations (Barreto & Preto, 1996).

All of the concepts mentioned thus far, i.e. gender identity, self-concept, self-esteem, etc., are involved in the development of one's perception of self. However, many, if not most, individuals possess an idea of what one's ideal self would be, as well as an image of one's perceived real or actual self. Many research studies in the past decade have focused on comparing and contrasting these perceptions of real self and ideal self among individuals of differing and same genders and countries. Williams and Best (1990), in their study of 14 countries, found that men rated the concepts of perceived self and ideal self higher than women. Additionally O'Leary, Page and Kaczmarek (in press), in their study between the U.S. and Ireland, found that females rated the potency, or strength, of ideal self and real self lower than males. Women in the United States and the U.S. Virgin Islands rated the potency of ideal self lower than man as well, although there were no differences in ratings of the evaluative, or goodness, and the potency of real self (Looby, Gerard & Page, 1997). Although with little empirical support, a popular belief exists that there are differences in ratings of overall self esteem between males and females, and furthermore, that these differences can lead to the explanation of all gender related phenomena (Watkins, Akande, Cheng & Regmi, 1996; Frable, 1997). The differential rating on self-esteem in some studies may, in part, be due to the area of the self under investigation. For example, males in the United States have

a tendency to report higher self esteem in the areas of mathematics, leadership, physical abilities, and appearance while females report higher esteem in the areas of verbal skills, social skills, school and moral facets of the self (Fontaine, 1991; Watykins *et al.*, 1996). These results suggest that the context of the measures on how the self is viewed or the context on which it is based may be skewed in favor of male standards (Williams & Best, 1990; Pierrette & St-Amant, 2000; O'Leary, Page & Kaczmarek, in press). However, this hypothesis is based on studies conducted in the U.S., and may not apply to other cultures.

The current study is an attempt to discover perceptions of self, both real and ideal, of males and females from the United States and Portugal. The goal is not only to understand how American and Portuguese individuals perceive themselves, but also to foster cultural and gender awareness as a result. There is currently very little research available comparing the perceptions of self of these two cultures.

Method

Subjects

The study consisted of 157 volunteer participants from the United States and Portugal, 66 of which were male, 33 from the U.S. and 33 from Portugal. There were 57 U.S. females and 34 Portuguese females, totaling 91 females. Eighty-five of the participants were graduate students of counseling and undergraduate students of psychology and educational psychology at a large university in the southeastern United States. In the U.S. graduate population, there were 17 males and 18 females. In the U.S. undergraduate population, there were 11 males and 18

females. The mean age of the U.S. students was 26.5 with a standard deviation of 6.6. The Portuguese population consisted of 72 graduate and undergraduate students of Psychology at a large university in central Portugal. There were 16 male graduate students and 6 female graduate students. Of the undergraduate students, 22 were male and 28 were female. The mean age of the Portuguese students was 25.9 with a standard deviation of 6.5.

Instrument

The semantic differential, which was developed by Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957), and has been utilized internationally (Husu, 1980; Lawson, Smadi & Tel, 1986; Mackinnon & Keating, 1989; Williams & Best, 1990; Page et al., 1994; Cheng & Page, 1995; Page & O'Leary, 1997; Paixão et al., 2001) was used to quantify the perceptions of the students regarding their real self and ideal self. The semantic differential places opposing adjective pairs on a continuum with one adjective represented by the number "one" and the opposing adjective represented by the number "seven". When factor analyzed by the developers of the semantic differential, the adjective pairs were found to cluster around three factors: evaluative, potency and activity (Osgood et al., 1957). In this study, only the evaluative, what people think about a concept, or its "goodness" (Kerlinger, 1973), and the potency, how people feel about a concept, or its "strength" (Kerlinger, 1973), scales were used. The adjective pairs applied to the evaluative scale were good-bad, painful-pleasurable, beautiful-ugly, unimportant-important and positive-negative. The adjective pairs applied to the potency scales were feminine-masculine, serious-humorous, light-heavy, strong-weak and soft-hard. The students were asked to

place an "X" on the scales, at the location that most closely represented their thoughts or feelings about their ideal and real self. These scales have been translated to the Portuguese language and show "a strong factorial stability in the evaluative and potency scales" (Page, Paixão & Oliveira, 1998).

Reliability testing for the evaluative, potency and activity factors of the semantic differential has shown reasonably good reliability for different concepts (Kerlinger, 1973). The results on average test-retest reliability testing of the semantic differential were .79 for men and women on the evaluative scale. On the potency scale the reliability data was .75 for women and .77 for men (Norman, 1969).

Procedures

All of the students in this study were volunteer graduate and undergraduate. The scales were administered to them in classes at their university. The method of selecting students and conditions for rating the scales were equivalent at both universities.

Statistics

A 2 x 2 x 2 MANOVA was computed using degree (undergraduate/graduate), gender and country (United States/Portugal) as independent variables. The evaluative and potency scales of "My Real Self" and "My Ideal Self" served as the four dependent variables. Least square means were used instead of regular means. Multivariate tests were calculated with Wilks' Lambda F scores. An alpha level of .05 was utilized for all statistical analysis.

Results

The multivariate and univariate F scores for the interactions of sex x country x

degree, country x degree, sex x degree and the main effect of degree were not found to be statistically significant. However, the multivariate F score for the interaction effect of sex x country was significant, $F(4,146)=3.70$, $p=.01$, as well as the univariate F score for the evaluative scale of My Real Self, $F(1,149)=3.17$, $p=.04$, and for the potency scale of My Real Self, $F(1,149)=5.2$, $p=.02$. Corresponding least square means calculations revealed that United States females (LSM=28.88, SD=4.63) evaluated My Real Self significantly highest of all groups, and Portuguese females (LSM=25.24,

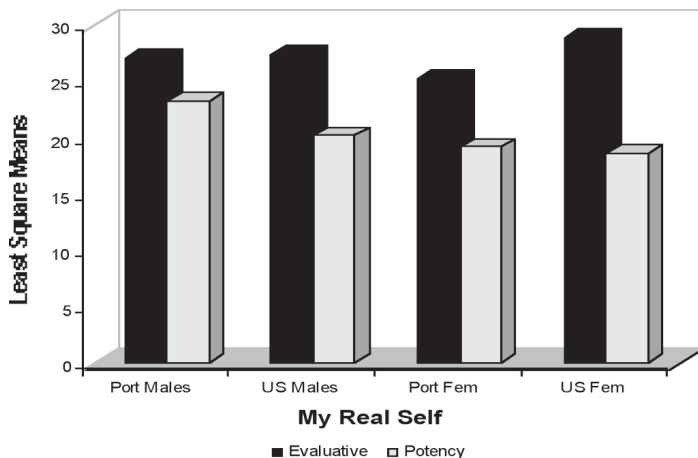
SD=5.64) evaluated My Real Self significantly lower than the others. Least square mean scores for males from Portugal (LSM=27.02, SD=4.63) and the U.S. (LSM=27.40, SD=4.40) were statistically similar.

Males from Portugal rated the potency of My Real Self (LSM=23.30, SD=3.13) the highest of all groups and U.S. females interestingly ranked potency of My Real Self (LSM=18.65, SD=3.32) the lowest. U.S. males ranked potency of My Real Self (LSM=20.18, SD=3.16) slightly higher than Portuguese females (LSM=19.18, SD=4.05).

Table 1 - Least Square Means (LSM) and Standart Deviation (SD) of the Means of the Multivariate F Score for the Interaction Effect of Sex by Country

Country		My Real Self (E)*	My Real Self (P)*	My Ideal Self (E)*	My Ideal Self (P)*
U.S. Females:	LSM	28,882	18,647	32,130	17,861
	SD	4,63	3,32	4,03	2,98
U.S. Males:	LSM	27,404	20,176	31,265	20,746
	SD	4,40	3,16	3,84	2,84
Portugueses Females:	LSM	25,244	19,176	31,119	17,464
	SD	5,64	4,05	4,92	3,36
Portuguese Males:	LSM	27,017	23,295	30,278	22,165
	SD	4,36	3,13	3,79	2,80

Note: (E) = Evaluative, (P) = Potency



The multivariate F score for the main effect of Sex was significant, $F(4,146)=15.726$, $p=0.00$, as well as the univariate F score for the potency scale of My Ideal Self, $F(1,149)=55.36$, $p=0.00$. Corresponding least square means showed males ranking the potency of My Ideal Self (LSM=21.455, SD=2.86) significantly higher than females (LSM=17.66, SD=3.00). The univariate F score for the main effect of country was significant, $F(4,146)=3.44$, $p=0.01$. None of the univariate F scores were reported as significantly different due to the significant interactions effect of sex by country for My Real Self.

lives of men and women continue to unfold in different worlds. The socialization within these worlds has resulted in males and females developing different ideas of who they want to be or “should” be. One interpretation consistent with previous research is that women view their ideal roles as less strong than the ideal roles of men (Williams & Best, 1990). O’Leary, Page and Kaczmarek (in press) found similar results in a parallel study with Irish and American subjects. In this study Irish and American females rated the potency of both My Ideal Self and My Real Self significantly lower than Irish and American males. Hattie (1992) cited

Table 2 - Least Square Means (LSM) and Standard Deviation (SD) of the Means (SE) of the Univariate F score for the Main Effect of Sex

Country	My Ideal Self (P)*		My Ideal Self (P)*		
Males:	LSM	21,455	Females:	LSM	17,663
	SD	2,86		SD	3,00

*P = Potency

The multivariate F score for the main effect of country was significant, $F(4,146)=3.437$, $p=0.010$. The univariate F score was significant for the evaluative, $F(1,149)=6.473$, $p=0.01$, and potency scales, $F(1,149)=10.28$, $p=0.00$, of My Real Self for the main effect of country, as well. These least square means of these scores will not be reported due to the significant interaction effect of sex by country for My Real Self.

Discussion

This study attempted to differentiate how men and women in Portugal and the United States rate themselves on the evaluative and potency Semantic Differential Scales of My Ideal Self and My Real Self. In our research, females rated the potency of My Ideal Self significantly lower than the males. These results may indicate that the

several hypotheses regarding these differences in gender views such as women’s minority group status, increased amount of role conflict, a greater economic and social dependence, and a cultural view of inferiority versus men. Similar results were also found in studies of the U.S. Virgin Islands (Looby, Gerard & Page, 1997) and in the study of 14 countries by Williams and Best (1990).

The current research indicates that Portuguese females evaluate My Real Self significantly lower than all other groups. Previous research on gender differentiation in Portugal supports this finding (Hollos & Leis, 1985). Women’s thoughts and perceptions about themselves are different than males in Portugal. Further interpretation indicates that these results fit the mores attributed to cultures of the Mediterranean with which Portugal is

associated. Research within these cultures has indicated that women are encouraged to be interior-oriented and private (Brogger & Gilmore, 1997). Guided by an “honor-shame” value principle, it is customary for women to be modest. Similar results were found in studies of the self within Chinese culture, which has a similar cultural view towards humility and self-assertiveness (Page & Cheng, 1992). It would, therefore, be erroneous to conclude that Portuguese women have lower perceptions of themselves than the other groups.

Another finding was that Portuguese men rated the potency of My Real Self significantly higher than Portuguese females and the American males and females. This finding is consistent with the belief that open displays of strength and virility are valued characteristics for males in Portuguese culture, often being characterized by the term's *machismo* or, in a more specific way, *marialvismo* male posturing (Brogger & Gilmore, 1997). In many parts of Portugal, men are said to be extroverted, public beings. Introverted behavior in males is often harshly criticized by members of both sexes (Brogger & Gilmore, 1997).

The current study was conducted with volunteer university graduate and undergraduate students of counseling and psychology in Portugal and the United States. Although the results of this research have many possible implications, the interpretations are tentative at best. The very nature of counseling and psychology programs may have influenced the results since students in these fields may have developed different perceptions of self than other members of the two different cultures. Further research is needed with other populations within these countries.

References

- Barreto, A., & Valadas, P.C. (1996). *Portugal 1960-1995: Indicadores Sociais*, Mirandela: Cadernos Público.
- Brogger, J., & Gilmore, D.D. (1997). The matrifocal family in Iberia: Spain and Portugal. *Compared Ethnology*, 36, 13-30.
- Bruneau, O.J. (1985). Self-concept: A comparison of native American and Anglo preschoolers. *Psychology in the Schools*, 22, 378-379.
- Castro, E.F., Pimenta, F., & Martins, I. (1988). Female independence in Portugal: Effect on suicide rates. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 78, 147-155.
- Cheng, H.P., & Page, R.C. (1995). A comparison of Chinese (in Taiwan) and American perceptions of love, guilt and anger. *Journal of Mental Health Counselling*, 17, 210-219.
- Coelho e Silva, J.P. (1993). *Expectativas de controlo percebido: contributo para o estudo dos determinantes cognitivo-sociais do esforço e do desempenho na matemática*. Dissertação de Mestrado não publicada. Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação. Universidade de Coimbra.
- Fontaine, A.M. (1991). Desenvolvimento do conceito de si próprio e realização escolar na adolescência. *Psychologica*, 5, 13-31.
- Frable, D.E. (1997). Gender, racial, ethnic, sexual and class identities. *Annual Review In Psychology*, 48, 139-162.
- Griffin, N., Chasin, L., & Young R.D. (1981). Measurement of global self-concept versus multiple role-specific self-concepts in adolescents. *Adolescence*, 16, 49-55.
- Hattie, J. (1992). *Self-concept*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

- Hollos, M., Leis, P.E. (1985). "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world": Family interaction and decision making in a Portuguese rural community. *Ethos*, 13, 340-357.
- Husu, L. (1980). The Semantic differential and the study of cultural differences. *Sociologia*, 17, 110-117
- Jambunathan, S., Hurlbut, N. (2000). Gender comparisons in the perception of self-competence among four-year-old children. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*. 161 (4), 469-478.
- Kaufman, D.M. (1995). *Clinical neurology for psychiatrists*, 4th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Saunders.
- Kerlinger, F.N. (1973). *Foundations of Behavioral Research*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Kuperminc, G.P., Blatt, S.J., Shahar, G., Henrich, C., Leadbeater, B.J. (2004). Cultural equivalence and cultural variance in longitudinal associations of young adolescent self-definition and interpersonal relatedness to psychological and school adjustment. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 33 (1), 322-335.
- Lawson, E.D., Smadi, O.M., Tel, S.A. (1986). Values in Jordanian university students: A test of Osgood's cultural universals. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10, 35-51.
- Looby, E.J., Gerard, P., Page, R.C. (1997). Perceptions of self among university students in two cultures: The United States and the Virgin Islands. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 13, 21-36.
- Looby, E.J., Page, R.C., Ruammake, K.C. (1997). Perceptions of feelings among students from the United States and Thailand. *Psychologia*, 40, 67-71.
- Lutz, C.J., Ross, S.R. (2003). Elaboration versus fragmentation: Distinguishing between self-complexity and self-concept differentiation. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 22 (5), 537-551.
- Mackinnon, N.J., Keating, L.J. (1989). The structure of emotions: Canada-United States comparisons. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 52, 70-83.
- Malpique, C. (1990). *A Ausência do Pai*. Porto: Ed. Afrontamento.
- Neto, F. (1997). Gender stereotyping in Portuguese children living in Portugal and abroad: Effects of migration, age, and gender. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 20, 219-229.
- Neto, F., Williams, J.E., Winder, S.C. (1991). Portuguese children's knowledge of sex stereotypes. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 22, 376-388.
- Norman, W.T. (1969). Stability characteristics of the semantic differential. In J.G. Snider & C.E. Osgood (Eds.), *Semantic Differential technique: A sourcebook* (pp. 303-317). Chicago: Aldine.
- Osgood, C.E., Suci, G.T., Tannenbaum, P.H. (1957). *The measurement of meaning*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Page, R.C., Paixão, R., Oliveira, R.A. (1998). Estudo factorial do Método de Diferenças Semânticas numa População Portuguesa. *Psychologica*, 20, 15-26.
- Page, R.C., Berkow, D.N. (1991). Concepts of the self: Western and Eastern perspectives. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 19, 83-93.
- Page, R.C., Cheng, H. (1992). A preliminary investigation of Chinese and American perceptions of the self. *Psychologia*, 35, 12-20.
- Page, R.C., O'Leary, E. (1997). A comparison of perceptions of love, guilt

- and anger in Ireland and the United States: Implications for counseling. *Counseling and Values*, 41, 267-278.
- Page, R.C., Taffel, S., Ruammake, K.C., Reed, J. (1994). A comparison of Thai and American counseling students' perceptions of counseling. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, 17, 1-11.
- Paixão, R., Oliveira, R.A., Page, R.C., Uwah, C.J., Carlton, J.L. (2001). A comparison of the perceptions of Love, Anger and guilt in Portugal and the United States and implications for counseling. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 25, 659-670.
- Pierrette, B., St-Amant, J.C. (2000). Gender identities and school success. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*. 46 (3), 281-294.
- Quatman, T., Swanson, C. (2002). Academic self-disclosure in adolescence. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology*, 128 (1), 47-76.
- Rassam, A. (2001). Intimate selfing in Arab families: Gender, Self, and Identity. *American Ethnologist*, 28 (3), 721-724.
- Shweder, R., Sullivan, M.A. (1993). Cultural psychology: Who needs it? *Annual Review of Psychology*, 44, 497-523.
- Spencer, M.B., Markstrom-Adams, C. (1990). Identity processes among racial and ethnic minority children in America. *Child Development*, 61, 290-310.
- Triandis, H.C. (1989). The self and social Behavior in differing cultural contexts. *Psychological Review*, 96, 506-520.
- Triandis, H.C., McClusker, C. Hui, C.H. (1990). Multimethod probes of individualism and collectivism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59, 1006-1020.
- Van Gundy, K. (2002). Gender, the assertion of autonomy, and the stress process in young adulthood. *Social Psychology Quarterly*. 65 (4), 346-366.
- Watkins, D., Akande, A., Cheng, C., Regmi, M. (1996). Cultural and gender differences in the self-esteem of college students: four-country comparison. *Social Behavior & Personality*, 24, 321-328.
- Wiest, D.J., Wong, E.H., Kreil, D.A. (1998). Predictors of global self-worth and academic performance among regular education, learning disabled, and continuation high school students. *Adolescence*, 33 (1), 601-619.
- Williams, J.E., Best, D.L. (1990). *Sex and psyche: Gender and self viewed cross-culturally*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Williams, J.M., Currie, C. (2000). Self-esteem and physical development in early adolescence: Pubertal timing and body image. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*. 20 (2), 129-150.

